

A Note from the Author, Ricken Hale

Dearest Reader,

I thank you humbly and sweetly for your fervent interest in my upcoming book, *The You You Are*. As you know, the book was meant to release nationwide this week, and I was deeply eager to share its splendors with you.

Unfortunately, events beyond my control have led to a brief delay as I liaise with several corporate parties as to precisely where and in what form the book should be released. On

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the advice of counsel, I sadly cannot say more at this time.

I've no doubt this will cause widespread dismay and wrath, but I ask that you remain nonviolent as these issues play out.

In the interim, I have negotiated to allow the release of the first eight chapters in both digital and spoken word format, in hopes that my web-savvy readers' yearning might be at least partially quelled. Please know that these pages are but the first steps on the journey, and that full self-knowledge cannot be attained until you experience the book in full.

Bless you for your patience, and please enjoy the first octet of chapters of *The You You Are*.

Dr. Ricken Lazlo Hale, PhD

Introduction: A Book Begins

It's said that as a child, Wolfgang Mozart killed another boy by slamming his head in a piano.

Don't worry. My research for this book has proven the claim untrue. As your heart rate settles, though, consider the power an author, which we'll refer to as Me, can hold over a reader, heretofore called You. But what, indeed, is You? How can You mean different things to millions of readers around a vast earth? And,

perhaps most importantly, who are You?

I'm not asking out of mere politeness. For You, my friend, are no mere consumer of this book, sucking down nouns and adverbs like a plump babe to the teat. In fact, your relationship to this work is far more intimate and profound. You are its subject.

The gentle snow of dandruff I sense dusting the pages informs me that you're scratching your head.

"Hold the phone," you scoff aloud. "Me?? *I'm* the subject of Dr. Ricken's new book? Yeah, right! In my dreams, maybe!"

You stand and go to the vanity, examining your humble visage in the mirror. Could it really be? Could YOU be the focus of a work of literature read by millions of readers around a

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vast earth? Are you interesting enough? Cool enough? Clever enough? Sexy enough? Wealthy enough? Elegant enough? Are you... well... enough?

Consider: Yes.

But here I am crooning your praises when we've not yet properly met! I, as you likely know, am Dr. Ricken Lazlo Hale, PhD. I am an author (reductive as the term may be), a healer, an archer, a writer, a gadfly, a reformed nomad, a husband, and, at the time of writing, a terrified, soon-to-be father! I am the youngest son of renowned performance artists Bob and Grace Hale, known collectively as HumpDumper, though I have sought for decades to distinguish myself from their intellectual shadow. I am a

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friend to birds, the earth, the arts, the elderly, the destitute, and the upset.

You are somewhat trickier to define. After all, you're one of potentially billions of humans who've purchased this tome, who may be reading this exact sentence at this exact moment! So which of these innumerable readers are You? The answer, like the gentle and maligned Tyrannosaur, can only be found by gazing into the past.

Recall for a moment when you first picked up this book: How did you feel as your eager eyes fell to the page, only to be accosted by a gruesome, paradigm-shattering (and again, untrue) fact about beloved songwriter Wolfgang Mozart?

Statistically, your reaction almost certainly fell into one of five cate-

gories, and figuring out which one is deeply instructive in determining your You.

First, perhaps you simply stopped reading. Fearing the sting of revelation, you hurled the book into the waste bin and fled outside to bury your head in the sand like a duck. These are the actions of **The Coward**. If you fall into this category, congratulations, you are no longer reading this book and my ideas cannot hurt you. If you are a housemaid or butler who has fished the book from amidst your employer's rubbish, please know that you work for a milk-livered swoon, to whom you owe no continued fealty. Trust me, my fellow servant, you'd be better off a beggar.

Others among you may have met the news with fury. "To hell with

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Mozart,” you bellowed. “I’ll buy an even bigger piano and do the same to him!” In your rage, you failed to realize Mozart has been dead for centuries. You are **The Warrior**. Impulsive and volatile, you have come to this book seeking respite from your own fire.

By contrast, perhaps your instinct was to defend the young maestro. “He was a sensitive child,” you cooed. “And I bet the other boy teased him for his name!” These sentiments mark you as **The Dove**. Peaceful to a fault, you prioritize amity over justice and vehemently avoid tumult. (Of course, you are likely not a literal dove, though studies do suggest that birds can read and understand up to 500 words.)

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Fourth, if you quickly went to work committing your feelings on the matter to the page, then you may be **The Scribe**. The rarest type of person, you cannot help but weave your thoughts into splendid prose, for which society rewards you with acclaim. You may have already won several prestigious awards, and are likely considered charismatic and dashing by your peers.

Finally, it's possible you've never heard of Mozart at all. Mayhaps you've spent this whole introduction in self-conscious dread, wondering how this cultural touchstone has eluded your knowledge. To this, I say this: Nothing is wrong with you. You are not stupid, nor rube-like, nor cornfed. You have come into this book an innocent, teeming with beau-

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teous potential. You are **The Vestal**, and in your absence of knowledge, there is room for wisdom. You are, in fact, the You I most affectionately welcome on this journey.

At this point I urge you to write down your “Youtype” on a scrap of paper and affix it to your vanity, as it will prove important over the course of this book. Be you The Coward, The Warrior, The Dove, The Scribe or The Vestal, I welcome you upon this journey with equal affection. We’ve taken but the first step in discovering which unique and beautiful You you are.

CHAPTER 1

Name, Name, Go Away

Let us address the elephant in the room: My name.

Whatever questions you have, I can assure you I've heard them many times in barrooms and ashrams around the world, all the way back to my nursery school play yard. So let's get the big ones out of the way.

First off, How is it spelled? H-A-L-E. Not H-A-I-L, like the icy discharge that pelts us from a winter's sky, nor the clumsy flailing motion

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with which we summon a taxi. The name, in fact, comes from “Hallus,” the Swiss word for Virile or Strapping.

Second: Am I descended from the beloved comedic actor Alan Hale Jr? I am not, though I deeply respect his work and used to imagine him watching over me as I did my studies.

Third: Am I proud of the name? Well, that one’s a bit tougher to answer, dear reader.

After all, what has a family name to do with who You actually are? Consider Augustus Caesar, the inventor of democracy, who we now most associate with a revolting white salad sauce. Or Lucille Ball, who would shudder to learn her last name is now synonymous with a bouncing children’s toy. Or Schrödinger, history’s

greatest feline researcher, whose nomenclature has been all but hijacked in the zeitgeist by Charlie Brown's piano-loving chum. (No relation to the fictitious child in the Mozart story, of course.) What benefit did any of these great figures derive from their respective surnames?

None. But I've gone and dodged your question.

Readers of my previous books know that both my conception and birth took place in a small theatre behind a defunct perfumery in Western Oregon, as part of a nine-month performance art piece originated by my parents titled "Smells Like Afterbirth, F**ker." It was noteworthy in that I was the first child sired exclusively for theatrical purposes, and

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critics at the time hailed it as “a baroque deconstruction of the increasingly perverse human urge to procreate.” My birth was witnessed by such cultural leaders as Jason Robards, Lina Wertmüller, Walt Frazier, and Oregon Governor Robert W. Straub, who called it “American theater at its most sublimely obscene.”

Though I cannot remember my birth performance, the knowledge of it has always brought me great joy. Knowing that a version of me, even one I don’t recall, brought meaning and profundity to so auspicious a coterie of persons, infused into my young life a deep sense of purpose. Yet, as I aged, irrational questions began to creep in. Was the piece truly as revelatory as the critics claimed? Was it not simply a retread of the

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Reeperbahn shows of Hamburg? Did my parents actually want a child? The latter question especially took root as HumpDumpster moved on to new pieces, including 1992's critically lauded "Cheers, F**kers," in which they held a Boston bar at actual gunpoint for 36 hours, leading to a quasi-substantive prison term. This and other endeavors led to long stretches where I was alone, and it was in these silent periods that a grim and intrusive resentment — of my parents, my lineage, and even myself — began to take hold.

So am I proud of my surname? The answer, which is yes, may surprise you. You see, with time I came to understand that my parents hadn't chosen art over me. Rather, they had made art my brother, a co-equal sib-

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ling with whom I would forever vie for their love. As I aged, I learned much from my brother — He was older, after all — and slowly grew fond of him. It was this fondness that led me to my own career in the arts and literature, one that has brought me closer to my parents. Though still extremely busy, they support my work and encourage me to continue pushing through my “conventionalist phase” and find my true voice.

But proud though I am to be a Hale, it is my first name with which I more readily identify: Ricken. Studies show that first names tend to be particular to individuals, whereas surnames are tied to the family. Thus, a first name is the far more instructive indicator of your You. Many notable figures, from Aristotle to Fabian, had

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no last names at all, and were all the better for it. Your first name is yours, to make of it what you wish, unladen by the sins and agonies of generations past — and, in that, there is power, dear reader.

Also, bear in mind that names are one of the few traits that separate mankind from the beast, alongside clothing, music, social hierarchy, swimming, and bridges. Consider, for example, the great ape of yore. She walked upright, ate plums and figs, nursed her young, and looked to the stars for wisdom, just as you or I might. She was, in most regards, quite like a human. But one thing she lacked was a name, one that was hers and hers alone. Did the lack of names trouble these elegant creatures? We'll never know, because apes did not

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attain language until 1972, when ASL was invented by a lowland gorilla named Koko. And whilst I've long admired Koko, she was only six at the time of this breakthrough, and had little insight into the mindset of pre-historic yore's great apes. To me, however, it is clear that namelessness stymied the species' development, which is why they now live in cages whilst man drapes himself in finery.

I'd like you now to look back at that scrap of paper upon which you wrote your Youtype. Perhaps you were The Coward. Or The Warrior. The Dove? The Scribe? Or possibly The Vestal. Whatever your type, I want you to find another scrap of identical size, and write upon it the next key piece of your identity: Your first name. Place this too upon your

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vanity, and notice how our definition of You is already growing in beauty and complexity.

But of course, a name is but one small piece of the great tapestry that is You. The food chain is awash with nameless beasts who still feel the weight of identity upon them. All creatures, from the leaping cat to the cowering shrew, think of themselves as You, a logical center for the universe.

Yet the cat eats the shrew, and we, like Schrödinger, live on to wonder what it means.

CHAPTER 2

Pollen Nation

My most recent book, *My Own Petard*, featured my favorite quote from the late Henry David Thoreau — “Every man is a virgin until he has known the touch of Mother Nature’s mossy flesh.” This line’s inclusion drew swift handwringing from Thoreau’s estate, who slammed it as “unverified,” “invented,” and “bizarre.” Petty barbs aside, I of course stand by the citation, which I believe to be both emotionally accurate and deeply

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splendid. Indeed, it was these very words that inspired my wife and I, along with another couple, to set out on the Mount Dillard Crest Hike several springs ago. Though eager for the trek, I could not have predicted that Mother Nature was coquettishly waiting to endow upon me an experience that would rival, or dare I say even surpass, that which she'd gifted Thoreau over fifty years prior.

My glorious wife, whom readers of *Petard* already know as Devon, had felt increasingly anxious with city life since the Dorner truck explosion the previous year, and had been urging me to away with her to the woods. Our companions, who despite being close family have requested I not print their names in my books, agreed to join after I sweetened the

deal with a bottle of spiced beer. Per their wishes, I shall refer to these two under the pseudonyms Flip and Nan, though this is regrettable, as their real names flow far better with my natural diction.

The hike itself was rigorous, even for one trained in advanced walking. Flip in particular tired quickly, and spent much of the first leg huffing like a land-bound sturgeon. After rubbing his feet in oil and taking some of his more frivolous supplies into my own pack (why one would need mouth floss on a hike is beyond me), I was happy to see him find his second wind. We snaked our way up to Musher's Outcropping, from which we enjoyed a beauteous view of Loch LeForge. Here, Nan and I read passages from *Doctor Zhivago*, while

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Flip and Devon dozed in the warm sun.

It was a rare moment of spiritual quiet in a deafening world, one for which I am profoundly grateful, especially now. But it was some miles later, as we neared the actual crest, that the journey's true purpose revealed itself.

Here, we came upon what appeared to be an elderly woman's powdered wig hanging from an azalea plant. I approached it, dismayed that an aged female hiker — who should be encouraged to partake in the sport — might have lost her wig, a traumatic experience that would surely dissuade her from future treks. As Flip and Nan hung back in inexplicable fear, I put my head very near the wig and noticed that it emitted a dull

hum. Perhaps the dear lady had also lost a hearing aid, which had become caught in the wig and was now fritzing in the dew.

It was at this moment that I felt my wife place a guiding hand upon my back. "Okay Ricken, honey, that's a beehive," she whispered affectionately. Almost sensually.

In my defense, I'd never seen a non-industrial beehive before. I'd interned in a honey plant as a young scholar, but wild bees were as foreign to me as the lush hills of Belgium. I couldn't help but laugh at the misshapen nest, so divorced from the perfectly constructed factory hives I'd come to know in my youth. Perhaps these were "hick" bees, I thought, unversed in the ways of modern hive construction. I laughed aloud.

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And I must confess that these little fellows continued to coax my laughter for the rest of the day. After realizing what they were, I insisted we make camp, that I might watch them at their labor. I delighted in how they darted hither and thither, thoroughly convinced of the dire importance of their work. *How like human beings they are*, I thought. It was only upon later reflection that I realized this observation was not merely hilarious, but devastatingly profound.

After all, what makes a funny little bee like a funny little human? What traits do we share with these pin-striped chaps? Not our number of legs. Nor the construction of our eyes. Our bodies are differently segmented, and our blood is vastly different tem-

peratures. Bees are small, whereas humans are medium-sized. Humans can grow beards, whereas bees cannot. On the surface, it would seem we have less in common with the noble bee than with even the great ape of yore.

However: No.

Bees, for those unschooled in entomology, are broken into three subsets: “Workers,” who build the hive, prepare the honey, and clean each other; “Queens,” who eat the honey and live in opulence; and “Wasps,” who fight wars at the queen’s behest and defend the hive from bears. If this sounds vaguely familiar, it should. It is nearly identical to the social structure that we as humans employ.

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See how the worker bee corresponds fluidly to the human laborer. The queen, by contrast, could be mistaken for a member of our ruling class: Presidents, CEOs, publishers. The wasp is analogous to a soldier or boxer. Bears, in this case, can stand in for themselves, as they pose a grave threat to both species. But consider how the greater community in both cases depends on the health of its individuals to survive. Should the worker bees fall ill and be unable to fly, the hive would fail and the queen would perish, along with her lavish lifestyle. So focused are these industrious workers on their leader's welfare that they do not perceive the importance of their own. To wit, human laborers may yearn to drop their ballast and skip about with the

frivolity of their overlords, without ever grasping that they themselves are the most vital appendage of the greater organism, or “hive,” that is mankind. A society with festering workers cannot flourish, just as a man with rotting toes cannot skip.

I tried to give voice to these sentiments later that evening, as the embers of our campfire slowly nestled into the soil. Devon, for all her sweetness, was irked that we’d stopped early and unreceptive to my musings. Flip, of course, made a joke of it all, pushing his bottom against me in a crude pantomime of a “sting attack!” Only Nan listened intently, noting the wisdom of the analogy and adding ideas of her own.

I carried Nan’s sweet generosity with me for the rest of that trek. I car-

ried it when, after returning home, I wrote a thesis on bee theory which was met with cruel mockery by my peers. I carried it when a professional slump forced me to briefly rejoin the workforce, becoming one of the very “worker bees” I’d thought I was helping.

I carried it as I walked to the podium at Nan’s funeral a year and a half later. A patch of ice on a dark road had taken her life from us, and we were gathered once again, this time to try to find a way to say goodbye.

I unfolded the scrap of tear-stained paper in my hand and read the following:

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*Like a bee with a broken
antenna*

*I am now in a sad man's
dilemma*

For draining my soul

Is a dark, weeping hole

*In the shape of my dear, sweet
friend Nan*

And now, here we are. And she's been gone two years. And the hive buzzes on.

I will admit, dear reader, to being in no state to finish the chapter properly, so I will ask that you simply transcribe this poem onto a paper scrap of your own and add it to the vanity. Because as even the humble worker bee understands, a vital part of being The You You Are is remembering The They They Were.

CHAPTER 3

Good God?

The spring of 1992 saw the release of an American religious satire film which I consider to be the most over-celebrated piece of commercial cinema ever produced. Before I reveal the name of said picture, and the deeply personal reasons for my disdain of it, I'll ask that you pause and consider whether such a discussion falls within your bandwidth. If you've no desire to hear a dissenting take on a piece of culturally lauded art that

you may hold precious, there is little shame in skipping ahead to Chapter 4.

To that same end, in this segment I will examine how the intricacies of religion — and its refraction through the cracked prism of art — play into one's identity. It will not be a facile discussion, and proverbial toes may be stepped on, but I feel this is a vital topic regardless of one's belief in "God" in any traditional sense. You may have moral reservations about continuing, but I promise that if I reach the hereafter before you, I shan't tattle. What's more, you may come away with a more nuanced view of what faith — or a lack thereof — truly means.

Sister Act was penned by Joseph Howard and follows a ribald lounge

singer, Deloris, who witnesses a brutal slaying at the hands of her criminal lover and must take physical and emotional refuge amongst the Catholic Sisterhood while posing as one of their own. Drawing inspiration from Titian's 1514 painting "Sacred and Profane Love" and Jonathan Lynn's 1990 film *Nuns on the Run*, the piece skewers many hallowed conventions of the time, including the separation of liturgical and popular music, and the notion that nuns should be real and not lounge singers. Condemned in its era as blasphemous and even pornographic, the film has seen a cultural reappraisal, with some now viewing it as a foremost example of American deconstructionist cinema. My friend and colleague Patton Thune called it "a brutalist eulogy of

20th-century sectarianism, of a piece with Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* or Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*."

Except... it isn't.

I suppose I've already lost some of you. But let me try to mitigate the damage by assuring you that my quarrel with the film is not one of personal offense. While I dabbled in Catholicism as a youth, I was never confirmed and hold little residual fondness for popery. Nor indeed did I "miss the moment," so to speak. In fact, I saw the film in cinemas on its opening weekend with my social worker Mrs. Duft, shortly after my parents' conviction. No, my loathing for *Sister Act* ultimately comes down to one thing and one thing only: It's simply nowhere near as profound as it thinks it is.

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Let's take a step back. Consider, if you will, St. Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God, as published in his hit novel *Proslogion* (and paraphrased here):

1. God is the greatest perceivable being.
2. The quality of existence is greater than that of nonexistence.
3. God perceivably leaves footprints on beaches.
4. Ergo, God exists.

The concept is explored further in the sundry works of Descartes, Leibniz and Gödel, and refuted by Gaulino's "Perfect Island" thought experiment. Advanced learning computers have been employed to determine whether the theorem holds

water. In truth, one of the few places in our global culture where you'll see no echo of St. Anselm's proof is in the 102 vapid pages of Joseph Howard's script for *Sister Act*.

Adding to the parade of indignities, the film wastes a hauntingly villainous Harvey Keitel as Deloris' murderous beau. While his casting is clearly meant to recall his sublime Judas Iscariot from *The Last Temptation of Christ* five years prior, Howard and the filmmakers do bafflingly little with this parallel. The brutal themes of faith explored in the earlier film are sanitized here to the point of impotence, and Keitel is left hanging like the very Messiah he once so poignantly betrayed.

So, what religion should you be? I do not know. The decision is

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extremely personal, and thus it may help us to return to the Youtype you were assigned in the introduction. While I'm no formal theologian, I've traveled enough to have some insight on which faith may pair well with your specific type. If you are The Coward, whose beliefs come from a place of fear and pettiness, then Puritanism may be a good fit. The Warrior, in all his vigorous aggression, may find concord in the teachings of the mighty sun god Ra. The Dove is fragile and infirm, and may thus benefit from the strength and cunning of the Freemasons. The Scribe, ever the rogue, tends to veer agnostic, while the sweet-natured Vestal may delight in the simple life of the Pennsylvania Mennonites. These are, of course, mere suggestions, and I lovingly sup-

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port whatever faith or deity you choose to follow. All, at day's end, are both valid and beautiful.

I myself ascribe to no defined religion, though certain experiences endow me with a potent sense of the divine: Holding my wife's hand as we fall asleep. That first crisp bite of a fresh banana. The laughter of children crowding around a radio to hear *Howdy Doody*. The thrill of publishing a global bestseller. The smell of an elderly librarian. The first time I ever saw the Liberty Bell.

But even more than the divine, what I believe in is people. To me, it is undeniable that human beings, for all their vices, exist. I see them daily, going about their business like bees in a hive. Even those I do not witness leave evidence of their existence

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behind. Every skyscraper, draw-bridge, bar of soap, or ball of twine is proof that human beings live and breathe upon this earth. Yes, even a toothless religious satire about a lounge singer-turned-sister of the cloth serves to prove the existence of its creators. By reading this book, you prove that I am real, just as the money I received for it proves that you are. In that way, dear reader, we are each other's God, and each other's worshiper. And this, more than any other, is a religion I can get behind.

Once you have chosen a theology with which you're happy, go again to the vanity and affix a totem of it to the mirror. This could be a Christian-man's cross, an An-Ra Scarab, or a Masonic square and compass. If by some chance you found commonality

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with my conception of faith outlined above, feel free to use a photo or etching of me to convey this.

Whatever you choose, know that this belief is a vital and precious piece of The You You Are, and that it is yours to defend with vigor. And fear not the judgment of the unlettered crowd, for your You is stronger than their They. They cannot crucify you if your hand is in a fist.

CHAPTER 4

A Coitus Among Us

“I think we just fucked the universe into existence.”

Through wearied breaths, I managed a chuckle at my wife’s colorful theory. I was lying next to her, staring at the ceiling, our bodies swaddled in Baltic wool. We didn’t know it yet, but we had just sired what will, by the time of publishing, be our firstborn daughter, Eleanor Rebeck Scout-Hale.

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I leaned over and kissed Devon tenderly between the breasts. “How do you figure that, my babe? Was the universe not already here when we began?” Indeed, our lovemaking, which had commenced hours prior, had taken us through four separate rooms of the house, each of which, to my knowledge, was a part of the existing universe.

She shook her head. “No, that one was fake. Everything before now was a simulation.”

“A simulation? By whom, pray tell?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the French.”

“Ooh la la, mon dieu!” My engorgement had abated at the moment of climax, but the dulcet sound of la langue Française, even coming from my own oafish gullet,

began to stir the ardor in me once again. I re-summited my wife, and the cosmic cycle of creation began anew.

Perhaps you think some impish publisher has slipped pages from a tawdry novella into this otherwise wholesome tome. I assure you, dear reader, this amorous tale was added with intent. For how can we deny the formative beauty of the sex act, and the robust sway it holds over our beings? As of this writing, I have made love 786 times, and each was a unique adventure into the very mouth of personhood.

But what is this thing: sex? To be sure, the definition encompasses more than mere ejaculative intercourse. Kissing, petting, nuzzling, flirting, role-play, poetry, and longing

all fall under the grand umbrella of sexual interaction. One can have sex with a stranger from across a crowded bread shop using only one's eyes and the flickering power of tension. I have had sex with Beethoven, Da Vinci, and Twain, often all in the same evening. To limit our notion of sex to mindless "humping" is feckless, and sucks from our vast world much of its elegant vitality.

For the purpose of this chapter, however, let us focus on the traditionalist definition. Sexual copulation is as old as mankind itself, and is in many ways its first taboo, predating alcohol and profanity by centuries. But while most cultures view sex as ugly or foul, I have always found it deeply erotic. The having of sex is pleasurable on both a physical and

psychic level, elevating us to planes of reality heretofore unseen.

I first discovered my affection for sex at a young age. My social worker, Mrs. Duft, had fallen into a salmon hatchery pond during one of our scheduled outings. As she emerged, drenched to the bone and angry as a bear, I became acutely aware of how her blouse suddenly clung to her girdle, outlining the lacy texture and curvaceous form thereof. I quickly banished the strange new feeling bubbling from my brain to my loins, but as the day wore on a foreboding cloud of shame followed me. Had some unseen wickedness ensnared me? Had I betrayed both the deep respect I held for Mrs. Duft and the trust of her kindly husband Baxtrom? That night, I penned a three-page let-

ter of apology to them both, which I delivered to their doorstep by bike and read aloud through tears. While both Dufts ultimately forgave me, it created a rift in our friendship that never thereafter fully healed, and I vowed to not again succumb to such depravity.

The next time the roiling happened was two days later. Suffice it to say a CPR dummy was involved, but the greater takeaway was clear enough. Sex, be it friend or foe, was in my life to stay.

I would not make peace with this until years later, when a high school health instructor told me something that would shift my values forever. Sex, it turned out, was not simply an act of debauchery—it was the primary method of human reproduction.

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There is virtually no one alive, I learned, who was not sired through the physical act of love. Mohandas Gandhi, Coco Chanel, Burl Ives, and yes, Mr. and Mrs. Duft, would all be but hollow air if not for the “perversities” of sex. Perhaps one day I, too, would love someone well enough to create a new life, a child upon whom we could shower warmth and forgiveness like that which the Dufts had given me. How could something with the capacity to beget such wonders be itself anything but wonderful?

I recalled this revelation as I held my wife that night, so many years later. I did not know what we had just created together — and also, somehow, I did. There was something surrounding us there, for which I’ve no better word than magic. And in the

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ensuing months, as I've watched Devon's belly gracefully swell, I've sometimes shut my eyes and whispered a prayer of thanks to the sex act itself, and to its magic which I once so vehemently feared.

And if you, dear reader, still live with that fear or unease, then consider these humble pages your permission to step out into the light of erotic liberation. Life, like sex, is extremely fleeting, and while we are here we must dance nude under the moonlight, masturbate ardently, and make love with guiltless abandon. Your sexuality is as much a piece of you as your religion, your first name, your Youtype, or my poem about Nan. Thus, for your fifth addition to the vanity, I'll ask that you find something you consider... well... sexy!

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Something that whispers to your
nethers in a voice only they can hear.
This may be a pinup photo from
wartimes of yore, a beloved undergar-
ment, or a still life of a sinewy gourd.
Here again, I consent to my own
image being used, should that happen
to fit the bill. But whatever your
choice, sly reader, allow it a place of
prominence, as the time has long
since passed for sex to be hidden
away like stolen caramels under a
bearskin rug.

CHAPTER 5

Destiny

**An Acrostic Poem Experience by the Author, Ricken
Hale**

D is for Dreaming, the start of it all
E is for Energy, breaking down walls
S is for Stewardship, of home and of
earth
T is for Terror, which gives us more
worth
I is for Eyes, which observe us with
love, until...
D meaning Newness, rains down from
above. And

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Y That's a question we needn't now
ponder.
For Destiny, friends, shall deliver
all yonder.

CHAPTER 6

Wait, What Was That?

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“Hello, I... I think something may be terribly wrong.”

“It’s alright, just stay calm. Tell us what’s happened.”

“Oh god. I... Well you see... I’m reading Dr. Ricken’s new book...”

“*Life of an American Gadfly?*”

“No, his newest. *The You You Are.*”

“Ah, I hear it’s marvelous. Did you receive your Youtype yet?”

“Yes, I’m well past that bit. The trouble is, I’ve just finished Chapter 5, and it’s... How do I say this? It’s a poem.”

“You mean there’s a poem in it? Seems innovative. Goodbye...”

“No, wait! I mean the whole chapter is a poem. It’s one page!”

“...Good god. You’re positive?”

“Yes. I don’t want to get him in trouble, but—”

“He’s brought this on himself. So brash an assault on literary convention demands fierce reprisal. He’ll be shipped off to the gulag like an errant pauper.”

“Wait, but—”

“Good day! Click!”

Well, perhaps it's a bit hyperbolic. But I bet a few of you had some version of this exchange in your head after finishing the last chapter. I blame you not for your confusion, and appreciate your restraint in summoning the thought police. And I assure you, aside from some minor Couvade syndrome, I am of sound mind and body.

So. What did you just experience?

"Repetition and Subversion" is a strategem long employed in military circles, which only breached the literary world in the past few years. I learned of it during a ten-day retreat of global thought leaders in the moth fields of Spain last spring, where it blew the minds of artisans and monarchs alike. The basic notion is that one sets up a pattern, repeating it

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enough times as to lull one's enemy (or reader) into a sense of calm, before breaking it suddenly and dramatically. The tactic was employed by the likes of Hannibal (who rode horses into battle before suddenly switching to elephants), Washington (who established a public fondness for tea, then sunk a tea ship), and Grant (who returned Lee's sword to trick him into losing the Civil War).

If this all seems a bit academic, let us personalize it. Imagine yourself a General. In planning an important raid, you may think to send your most fervent soldier: a warrior who's bested the enemy before. Yet your enemy may foresee this, so consider instead the tepid infantryman; the phlegm-soaked mercenary with a pattern of self-service and buffoonery.

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He is the last man your foe will see coming, and this, if his loyalty can be secured, makes him the deadliest knight upon the field. Expectation is not destiny. Expectation is a sword.

This wartime philosophy so elegantly applies to literature, however, that as an author I now truly consider myself to have seen combat. And in a way, you have too.

You see, I've spent the first four chapters of this book, plus intro, setting a pattern: A theme is introduced, an anecdote given, and a piece of your identity revealed, climaxing with the ritualistic affixing of the totem to the vanity. Perhaps you'd grown wise to this, and even begun to guess the totem before the chapter's end. And had I approached the notion of Destiny in the same rote fashion, you

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may have placed in my path an emotional block. Only through a sudden obliteration of the form was I able to bypass this, pivoting to a fully poetic structure and seeding the theme directly into your id, where I daresay it shall remain. Had I warned you the poem was coming, its seed would have withered in the soil of your mind, and the thematic tree which now grows inside you would have ceased to be.

I am sorry for deceiving you. And also I am not.

So what does this mean for you? Will you continue to receive totem assignments at the end of each chapter, or was this a mere farce meant to set up the poetic twist?

Indeed it was intended as the latter, but I must admit that like Pyg-

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malion I have fallen in love with my own creation. As such, we shall continue the ritual, beginning now as this chapter draws to its close.

Here we shall turn the tables, giving you the chance to surprise me. Poke about your bedchambers until you've found some possession which you think would subvert my expectation of You. Something so dissimilar from any of your previous totems that you feel it would shock me. Don't worry, my cardiologist assures me I can take it.

Once you've placed this item, take a step back and regard the growing picture before you. What I hope you see coming into focus is a sort of map, not just of who you are now, but of who you are becoming. Every path you'll follow, every mouth you'll kiss,

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every battle you'll fight till the end of your days can perhaps start to be hazily seen upon your vanity.

You see, this is no mere smattering of knickknacks you've amassed, dear reader. This is Destiny.

CHAPTER 7

Wounds Unhealed

“Everyone laughs at you the second you walk out of the fucking room.”

He was slurring, his breath cologned with whiskey. But it was clear enough what he'd said.

I was in Flip's basement. We were mere feet apart, close enough to see the veins pop from each other's heads, yet it felt, as it had in recent months, like we were shouting from opposite ends of existence. There was

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a satisfied viciousness in him as he watched his words pierce me. I'd never seen that in him before.

I hadn't come over that evening for a fight. I'd come for a cassette tape. For Nan's last birthday on Earth, I'd gifted her a self-produced Tuvan throat singing album, comprised of nine original works encapsulating what she meant to me. She'd responded with her usual kindness, often texting me to say she and Flip were listening to it. I'll be the first to admit I'm an unpolished throat singer, but she found something to compliment in every track. That's just how she was.

The copy I'd given her was the only one I'd made, so I'd come to Flip's that night to see if I could bor-

row it. It was six months since she'd left us.

I don't know just how the fight began. Flip, tipsy, led me down to the basement, where he assured me the tape was amidst Nan's old things. Feeling the pain wafting off him as he sifted through piles of broken memories, I tried to guide our chatter to lighter fare.

"So you really think you'll stick with this job?"

"Yes, Ricken."

Damn, I'd sounded judgmental. I kept my dullard trap shut as we continued the hunt, but it soon grew clear the tape was nowhere to be found.

"Hang on, I swear it's here—"

"It's okay, Flip. You lost it in the move, it happens—"

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“I didn’t lose it in the goddamn move, it’s here!”

I should have reached for patience. Here was this gutted man, my friend and relative, staggering about the unofficial tomb of his beloved twin soul. And all I could think was that the selfish bastard had thrown out my fucking tape. And now he was lying about it.

I said something, and he said something, and it became clear we were about to break something that could never be unbroken.

“It wasn’t yours to throw out!” I barked. “I could actually sue you for loss of—”

“I didn’t fucking throw it out!”

“You used to listen to it together, it gave you joy! Are you going to junk

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everything that ever gave you joy? Is that what you think she'd want??"

Flip threw something at the wall, which was either a saucepan or a saucepan lid. The mark remains there to this day. He was still for a moment, then turned back to me.

"We listened to it to make fun of you, Ricken. We'd laugh at it. She'd laugh at it. That was the joy it gave us. Everyone laughs at you the second you walk out of the fucking room."

And then that was a thing that he'd said to me.

I don't blame him for his words, nor would I adjudicate them as entirely true or false. Indeed, everybody does *not* laugh at me when I walk out of a room. But some people do. Some people always have, and not all of them have bothered to mind

their volume. So Flip's treatise was no great revelation, and the sting of it was brief.

What lingered was the feeling that this had come from both of them. And that in Nan's case, it would be the last thing I ever heard from her. Knowing her, I'm sure her laughter at my gift was playful, not cruel. But it was laughter. And I'll confess I wish I didn't know that.

At the time of writing, scientists know only two parasites that can live inside a human body for decades. One is the shy and misjudged tapeworm. The other, far more sinister, is the spoken word. Surely there have been verbal cruelties hurled upon you which still live inside you today. These are likely less corrosive than those vomited upon me by Flip, but I

bet they still hurt. Perhaps a snooty waiter once called your hat garish, or a passing sailor addressed you as “Bub.” Whatever your trauma, you’ll likely find that it lasts longer when caused by human words than by knives or falling boulders.

So how do we suck poison from our veins when that poison is made of words? Medically, we cannot. But perhaps we can temper its potency.

Here, as in many cases, I find it helpful to call upon my wise older brother: Art. We know from Chapter 5 that there is great transformative power in the acrostic poem format, and this can be applied here to therapeutic effect. To begin, write out something someone has said or screamed at you which has caused you pain. Then, from each letter of

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this foul phrase, birth a new word or phrase, one which is not vicious but celebratory — and specific to you. Continue through the end of the phrase until you've created something that looks like this:

*Everyone Laughs at You the Second
You Walk Out of the Fucking Room:
A Poetic Metamorphosis by the
Author, Ricken Hale*

Effervescent

Valorous

Exquisite

Regal

Young

Owes no money

Nice

Elegant

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Light on feet

Articulate

Uses recycling bin

Good

Handsome

Sleek

Archer

Thoughtful

Your friend

Original

Up up and away!

Titillating

Horse lover

Empath

The You You Are

Soft

Ears work well

Celestial

Ornate

No ulcers

Dreamer

Yields to pedestrians

Oily

Useful

Wellspring

Arborist

Lo and behold!

Knightly

Ozone conscious

Unconventional

Tease

Operatic

Feisty

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This book's author
Hemoglobin levels good
Essential

Fetching
Unperverted
Car owner
Kingmaker
Iron-willed
Never fear, Ricken is here!
Glamour

Rah-rah-rah!
Outlived childhood rival
Oxlip-scented
My own best friend

Note how Flip's original rebuke has been transformed by the bardic process. What was once a cruel sentiment is now a cruel sentiment and fifty-four lovely ones. To be clear, his

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words still live inside me, but their venom is diluted in the fluid of my own self-love. I've committed the poem to memory, and I declaim it quietly to myself any time I leave a room and get that funny feeling that someone behind me is having a chuckle.

In the year since our encounter in the basement, I've mended fences with Flip. We had a long talk over salted legumes where we both said we're sorry. I never did sue him over the tape, though legally it remains on the table. I know that if I floated the acrostic method above as a balm for his grief, he'd smirk and change the subject to movies or some peevish qualm he has with my beard.

I wish I knew how to help him. And perhaps someday I will. But for

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now, I'm grateful for who I *can* help:
You.

As you glue your own acrostic poem to the vanity, spare a hopeful thought for all those who have hurt you. For now that you've shown your pain can be healed, maybe theirs can be too.

CHAPTER 8

Pull Up a Charity

I have always admired the poor, and have dedicated much of my life to bettering their station through charity. Of course, I can hardly claim this as a novel idea.

First invented by Florence Nightingale in 1854, charity has blossomed into a global movement which now spans over 90 countries on four continents around the world. It transcends race, class, sexuality, and Youtype (though practitioners of it

tend to be Warriors, Doves, or Vestals).

The Accolades Experiment is a public works program founded by me after the success of my first book, *The Fun in Profundity*. It has been called radical and even terroristic (the program, not the book, though also the book), yet it's arguably done more to curb economic displeasure than any other project of its kind. We do not recognize any national law except that of human dignity, but we try to work with governments to effect change. I have not, to date, been arrested for my work with Accolades, but if need be, I am prepared to wear shackles so that others may simply wear coats.

The seed of the project came to me as reviews for *Profundity* began

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to pour in, which to my humble surprise were rapturous! Yet after days of reading about my “nubile wit” and “near-carnal understanding of the American soul,” an unfamiliar sadness took hold of me. *How dare I accept such abundant praise whilst others go with so little? How might I share this acclaim that the literary world has gifted me?*

As these questions swirled into a plan, I called to my lover at the time, who was in the solarium practicing laughing.

“Danise! Fetch a whiteboard!”

The concept I birthed that day was elegant but simple: Take snippets from positive reviews of my books, and replace my name with that of a group whom I feel is more in need of the compliment. Usually this is “The

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Poor,” but it varies by case. I then travel to low-income housing projects or shantytowns, where I stand outside and deliver these accolades to the residents by way of a bullhorn.

Imagine yourself, if you will, a destitute mother of four, asleep in your bed of rags. You awaken pre-dawn, not to your usual sting of plebeian shame but to a melodious voice assuring you, “The Poor are a treasure beyond compare! They show a sensitivity and jocular wit not seen since Milton!” You gather your sickly children and throw open the window sash to find a beloved celebrity author gazing in at you. His smile bathes you in purpose as he declares, “Three cheers for the Needy, whose cutting insight only sharpens with time!!” Praise of this kind, which may

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feel banal to me, can be life-changing for a person in need. To wit, many who have received our help have gone on to improve their lives, often leaving the projects after just my sixth or seventh visit.

Thankfully, I've not had to put personal funds into the Accolades Experiment, which is financed through donations and government grants. This has allowed me to bring our message to impoverished communities around the world, from Monaco to Santorini to the Maldives. What I have paid, consistently, is the emotional toll of trying to uphold the program's integrity in a world that can be hostile to such things.

I recall one instance where my puckish assistant, Balf, tried to hoodwink me into spending our surplus

funds on a “lap-top” computer to help with travel bookings. “It will be so much easier, Dr. Ricken!” he mewled. “Travel agents don’t correspond by mail anymore, and my hand is sore from all the writing!” Like the trickster servant Arlecchino, he was cradling his wrist in an ornate pantomime of agony.

Despite sensing a gift afoot, I told Balf I would sleep on his request, and that night I took to my bed, where I was visited in my dreams by the ghostly visage of Florence Nightingale herself.

“Mind your principles, Dr. Ricken,” she whispered, floating above me. “Charity was my gift to man, and by man’s hand it must be wrought.” She held my gaze for a long, sensual moment, and then suddenly

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screamed and disintegrated into blood, which rained down upon me in a torrent. I jolted awake.

The next morning, I denied Balf's "lap-top" request and instead used the funds to buy us a finer bullhorn. I swear before whatever God you chose in Chapter 3 that as long as I govern the Accolades Experiment, all travel correspondence will be hand-written, as Ms. Nightingale intended. Charity, like industry, would die without the warmth of human flesh and the light of human thought. What separates man from machine is that machines cannot think for themselves. Also, they are made of metal, whereas man is made of skin.

And since giving only makes us more human, my next challenge to you is this: Conceive and found a

charitable organization based on a cause that you hold dear. It's easier than one might think, and there are classes on how to secure funding and accreditation. Whether you wish to curtail bear populations, bathe the infirm, or send bottled water to astronauts, stay the course until the organization is procedurally viable. Then, once your licensing paperwork comes in, affix it to the vanity amongst your other totems. Of this addition, I dare say, you should be especially proud.

Of course, should you find you lack the aptitude to run a charity yourself, you may donate to someone else's. The back flap of this book includes instructions on how to give to the Accolades Experiment, as well as a tiered list of prizes you can receive in exchange. Three hundred

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dollars, for example, earns you a wool muff, hand-knit by Balf himself. All prizes come with a bespoke mounting cord, making them easy to hang upon the vanity.

So why do I care so much for the poor? The answer, which may shock you, lies in the next chapter. But for now, be glad in knowing that human charity has become an inextricable piece of the ever-expanding wonder that is You.

And should Ms. Nightingale deign to visit you in your bed tonight, give the old girl my regards.

**A Follow-Up from the Author,
Ricken Hale**

Dearest Reader,

This concludes the segment of *The You You Are* that I am currently able to share with you. Again, I apologize for any agony caused by the delay of the complete work.

Please keep in mind that you are now in a state of partial enlightenment, which can be both disorienting and highly dangerous. I urge you to exercise caution whilst in this state,

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and refrain from speaking publicly or driving a car. I would also recommend taking time off work until the book is released and you can ingest its themes in full.

Furthermore, assuming you have been mounting the totems as instructed, please cover your vanity in a bedsheet or tarp until such time that you can continue. Tarps are available at camping shops, while bedsheets can be found in any grocery store.

Thank you for beginning this journey with me, and for your generous patience. Though belated, I believe the full release of *The You You Are* is ordained by Destiny. And Destiny, friends, shall deliver all yonder.

Dr. Ricken Lazlo Hale, PhD

About the Author

Since upending the literary hierarchy with his debut book, *The Fun in Profundity*, beloved author and enigma Ricken Lazlo Hale has continued to awaken minds with such revered works as *Life of An American Gadfly*, *Wisdom for the Withered: Advice to Seniors from a Young Man*, and *My Own Petard*. In a career that has seen three global tours, two Le Creux Awards, seven libel suits and two retirements, Hale has persevered

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to become the foremost voice in the field of social wisdom. To quote Rebeck Gulk, “Ricken is more than a man, he’s a writer. The books come from him. No Ricken, no books.”